

Grief and Loss in the school setting: Recent developments in theory and practice



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The Losses of Childhood

Loss of Relationships

Death of a parent, grandparent, sibling, friend, classmate, pet
Absence of teacher, parent, sibling, friend

Loss of External Objects

Loss of favourite toy or object (blanket, dummy, teddy bear)
Loss through robbery or being misplaced (diary, special gift)

The Losses of Childhood

Loss in the environment

Fires, floods, and other natural disasters
Moving, changing school, changing family structure

Loss of Self

Loss of physical part of the body: tooth, arm, eye
Loss of self-esteem: physical, sexual, emotional abuse

The Losses of Childhood

Loss related to skills and abilities

Held back in school
Overweight, illness, physical disability

Loss related to habits

Sucking thumb, biting fingernails
Change in eating patterns or daily routines
Beginning or ending school

The disenfranchised grief of children

The relationship is not recognised

The death of a teacher, friend or playmate can be exceedingly painful to children, and its impact will be partly mediated by developmental factors.

The loss is not recognised

Many losses unrelated to death such as divorce, adoption, placement in foster care, and incarceration of one or both parents, may be considered insignificant and, hence, not recognised. Parents may be psychologically unavailable because of mental illness, major depression or substance abuse. Other losses include incest, the death of a pet or major moves.

The disenfranchised grief of children

The griever is not recognised

The belief that children are incapable of grief or do not have a need to grieve. Exclusion from ritual and conversation. Often the grief is unrecognised.

The death itself is disenfranchised

Suicidal death of a parent or sibling, the death of a family member by AIDS or a family member who is killed in the process of committing a crime might cause a young person to experience stigma. The resulting embarrassment and shame, can in turn, inhibit the grieving process.

The disenfranchised grief of children

The child may experience self-disenfranchisement

This may manifest in the desire of the child to protect their parents or siblings. If they perceive that the grief of their parent or sibling is too overwhelming, the children may forgo their own expressions of grief or even fail to acknowledge those feelings within themselves in order not to add to the pain of the family.

Children may also be reluctant to acknowledge their grief for fear of emotional flooding.

Children Grieve Differently Than Adults

A child mourns in “doses”—or on an intermittent basis

Children are more at the mercy of those around them for help or hindrance

Children (particularly teenagers) don't want to be different from their peers

The way children think affects their capacity to understand the finality, inevitability and irreversibility of death

Children Grieve Differently Than Adults

Adjusting to the reality of illness, death and loss is complicated by:

Children's developing conceptual understanding of death and dying

Lack of or distortion of information they receive

It is impossible not to communicate

Protection - isolation

support in sadness

Feelings

- **Shock and denial**
(‘I don't believe it!’)

- **Guilt**
(‘Why did/didn't I...?
If only I had ...’)

- **Anger**
(‘How can God
do this to us?’)

- **Jealousy**
(‘How is it
they haven't had
their mum die?’)



Feelings

- **Sadness/loneliness**
(‘I miss Dad so much; why can't he come back?’)
- **High anxiety**
(‘Who will take care of me?’)
- **Mood swings**
- **Relief**
- **Helplessness**
- **Fear**



Behaviours

- Withdrawal
- Clinging behaviour, school refusal
- Markedly aggressive behaviour
- Sleep disturbances or dreams of the deceased
- Changes in eating, toileting
- Change in appetite
- Crying
- Verbal attacks
- Bed-wetting

Thoughts

- Inability to concentrate
- Difficulty making decisions
- Low self-image
- Confusion
- Disbelief

Physical Reactions

- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Dry mouth
- Dizziness
- Pounding heart
- Heaviness of body
- Increased illness
- Tightness in chest
- Stomach aches

Factors that Affect the Child's Grief Experience

age and understanding of death
home and family circumstances
strength of family ties
emotional and financial stability
support of relatives
previous losses
individual personality
spiritual/religious upbringing
permission to grieve
adult role models

How a child understands death

1. Universality
2. Irreversibility
3. Non-functionality
4. Causality
5. Some continued life form

How a child understands death

1. Universality

Do children and animals die, too?
Do you have to die?
Do I have to die?
When will I die?

How a child understands death

2. Irreversibility

- How long do you stay dead after you die?
Once you have been "deaded" are you always dead?
If I did some special thing (eg. called 000 or gave a pill) to someone who was dead, could she or he be alive again?
Can you or I come back to life after you or I die?

How a child understands death

3. Non-functionality

- What do you do all the time when you're dead?
- Can you see anything, hear noises, or feel the heat and the cold when you're dead?
- Do people continue to eat, play, or go to the toilet? Do dead people get angry or sad?

How a child understands death

5. Some continued life form

- What happens after death?
- Where does your soul go when you die?
- Will I ever come back to life again?
- Will I be alive again in this body or in some different form?

(Corr, 1995)

A Stage-Based Description of Children's Understanding of Death

2. Children do grasp that death is final whenever it occurs, but add the claim that death can be avoided in some way (eg., by outwitting death—which is often thought of as an external force); and

Mostly includes children aged **between five or six and nine years**.

How a child understands death

4. Causality

- Why do people die?
- When my mummy was mad at me and said, "You'll be the death of me some day," and then was in the accident, did that mean I made her die?
- Can people die because someone wished that they would die?

A Stage-Based Description of Children's Understanding of Death

1. Children do not grasp the finality of death (usually equating it either with something like travel and ongoing life in another place or with sleep and ongoing life in some diminished form);

Mostly includes children aged **between three and five years**.

A Stage-Based Description of Children's Understanding of Death

3. Children grasp that death is both final and not avoidable, ie. irreversible and universal.

Starts for most children **around nine or ten years** of age and continues throughout life.

(Corr, 1995)

Developmental Considerations Younger Children

Live in the moment
Magical thinking ... believe that thoughts and behaviours can cause events
Anxiety
Repetitive and physical in their grief

Developmental Considerations Younger Children

Developing a better understanding of cause and effect
Detect feelings of others
Building a capacity for expressive language
May have many questions and a need for detailed information

Grief in Children

“Careful the things you say children will listen,
careful the things you do children will see and learn.

Children may not obey but children will listen.
Children will look to you for which way to turn, to learn what to be”.

Stephen Sondheim – Musical *Into the Woods*
The Witch

The Loss of a Parent by Divorce

More school aged children will lose a parent to divorce than lose a parent to death

Many children have more difficulty after a divorce than after parental death

Self-blame for the loss is higher in divorced children than it is in bereaved children

(Worden, 1996)

When a Sibling Dies

Lack of support for surviving siblings
Replacing the lost sibling
Overprotecting the surviving children
Jealousy of the sick sibling
Survivor guilt

(Worden, 1996)

Special Issues Regarding Sibling Death A Family Approach

Parents have a key role in the family as role models, and shape the way family members will respond

Crucial to understand how parents have responded

Children's grief may be similar to their parents
Key difference between parents' and children's grief is that children have a great need for continuity and security

Parents may be overwhelmed with their own grief and unable to attend to the needs of their other children

Suicide

One of the most difficult types of death for any bereaved person - rejection, disillusionment and shame

Adolescents particularly vulnerable to guilt and feelings of inadequacy, because of limited exposure to death, and limited ability to understand

Some researchers think "survivors" are at high risk for suicide themselves, and/or enduring physical and emotional responses.

Help - family sources, support groups, individual therapy

Important to monitor symptoms of self-destructive behaviour

Strategies

Offer help to parents as children are often best helped by their parents, or someone close and trusted.

If parents are able to cope then they will be able to care for their children.

Encourage and support continuing bond

Needs for closeness and security need to be met

Need honest, accurate information

Children's level of understanding changes over time

Three Tasks Facing Grieving Children

A child wants to *understand* what has happened when a death has occurred

A child wants to *express feelings* about the death

A child wants to *continue to live fully in the present and open up to the future.*

1. **A child wants to *Understand what has happened when a death has occurred***

THIS IS A THINKING TASK

How to help:

- Tell the truth - admit when you don't know the answer by saying so
- Allow a child to make guesses about the information that is not known
- Use the words "death" and "dead."
- Answer a child's questions, maybe over and over again

How To Help a Child *Understand*

Give a child choices about his/her involvement in the dying process - the viewing, the service and in other events during which they can learn about what has happened

Know that children may grieve over and over again as they grow older developmentally and are able to understand more

2. **A child wants to *Express Feelings about the Death.***

THIS IS A FEELING TASK

When the 'goneness' of someone who has died is felt then children have an emotional and physical response.

How to help:

- Listen, accept and care
- Keep a child safe. Maintain standards of discipline.

How to help a child *Express Feelings*

Do not let children hurt themselves or others. If they do so continually seek professional help.

Make available outlets for the big energy of feelings - sport, active play, loud voices, hitting pillows.

Lower expectations of children at school and at home, because grief takes tremendous physical and emotional energy.

Understand that children may feel and act younger when they are grieving.

3. **A child wants** to continue to live fully in the present and open up to the future.

THIS IS A PRACTICAL TASK

How to help:

Allow children to play hard, laugh hard, and have fun even as they mourn, for this is not disloyal. In fact, it is through this play that children can be restored.

Hold the vision of a child's healing. Have faith, even when they do not, that they will feel better.

The Needs of Bereaved Children

Help with overwhelming feelings

Involvement and Inclusion

Continued routine activities

Modelled grief behaviours

Opportunities to remember

(Worden, 1996)

The Six Support Needs of Bereaved Children

1. Acknowledge the reality of the death

Gently encourage to confront reality

Open and honest explanations (at their level of understanding)

Share clear information

Overcome instinct to protect

If you are old enough to love you are old enough to grieve.

The Six Support Needs of Bereaved Children

1. Acknowledge the reality of the death

News of death best conveyed by someone close to child

Avoid euphemisms – sleep, passed away

Assist in understanding – dead person's body has stopped working, will not see, hear and feel...

The Six Support Needs of Bereaved Children

2. Move toward the pain of loss while being nurtured physically, emotionally and spiritually

Encourage to embrace a wide range of thoughts and feelings

Desire to "spare children" is caused by adults' feelings of discomfort, fear or anxiety

The Six Support Needs of Bereaved Children

2. Move toward the pain of loss while being nurtured physically, emotionally and spiritually

Allow children to teach you how they feel

It's not about "will the child feel or not feel" but a question of "when he/she feels will they be able to express themselves in the presence of loving adults?"

The Six Support Needs of Bereaved Children

3. Convert the relationship with the person who has died from one of presence to one of memory

Mourning is not forgetting but establishing a new relationship with the deceased.

Non-judgemental support and understanding is needed

Remembering – keepsakes, photos, visiting places, reviewing photo albums

The Six Support Needs of Bereaved Children

4. Develop a new self-identity based on a life without the person who died

Bereaved children often find they are feeling and acting in ways that seem totally foreign

Be careful of the "hypermature" identity – "man of house", "big girl now", mother, co-parent

The Six Support Needs of Bereaved Children

5. Find meaning in the experience of loss or bereavement

Allows child to search for and restore a sense of meaning in life

Many adults are surprised to learn that even young children search for meaning

Searching through the "How" and "Why" questions. We don't have all the answers – need to acknowledge "not knowing"

The Six Support Needs of Bereaved Children

6. Experience a continued supportive adult presence in future years

Long-term nature of grief means bereaved children need adult "stabilisers" long after the death

Many children are emotionally abandoned shortly after the death

The Six Support Needs of Bereaved Children

Experience a continued supportive adult presence in future years

Aware of children's "griefbursts" – heightened periods of sadness, anger and anxiety. These may occur during significant periods – birthdays, starting new school, or holidays. Sometimes seemingly out of nowhere.

Principles for Intervention Strategies with Children

Don't expect what to hear; listen and pick up opportunities
Identify and deal with fantasies and give information; reality is always easier than fantasy
Keep the time perspective; don't rush integration
Create a network with a common understanding of the child

Developmental Considerations Adolescence

Time of dramatic physiological, cognitive, emotional, spiritual and social change
Increased sense of self
Quest for knowledge, understanding and awareness of place in the world
Search for meaning and purpose
Increased understanding about significance and realities of dying and the death experience

Developmental Tasks

Constructing an identity
Control
Autonomy
Emancipation from parents
Independence
Sexual identity
Career aspirations
Intimate relationships
Searching for new identity
Developing peer relationships
Developing beliefs/values

Tasks of Grieving

Facing reality
Experiencing the pain
Adjusting to changes
Relearning the world
Searching for meaning

Relearning the self
Acceptance of a changed reality

Factors that affect a young persons' grief experience

developmental level
family support
peer support
emotional and financial stability
previous losses
individual personality
spiritual upbringing
permission to grieve
adult role models

'Grief' & 'adolescence' are both transitional periods, characterised by loss and separation, along with a search for meaning and identity

(Papadatou, 1988)

Adolescent bereavement following parental death

The Child Bereavement Study researched the trajectory of grief children and adolescents experienced in the first two years following the death of a parent.

Core issues included the:

predictability of events
development of self-image &
gaining a sense of belonging.

Adolescent bereavement following parental death

The predictability of events

Bereaved adolescents were more anxious and fearful than non-bereaved adolescents.

Worden reasoned their anxiety and fear stemmed from “the lack of predictability in their lives caused by the death of a parent”

(Worden, 1996, p. 90).

Adolescent bereavement following parental death

Development of self-image

Bereaved adolescents did less well in school than their non-bereaved peers;

However, bereaved adolescents thought themselves more mature than non-bereaved youth.

Adolescent bereavement following parental death

Gaining a sense of belonging

Bereaved adolescents had problems gaining a sense of belonging, manifested particularly by difficulties getting along with others.

Non-bereaved adolescents did not display this extent of peer relationship problems.

Adolescent Bereavement

Forging relationships marked by a sense of belonging.

Elkind's (1967) concept of the “imaginary audience” (the tendency for younger adolescents to think others are continually judging and observing them) can be used to explain bereaved adolescents' reticence to discuss their grief with peers.

Adolescent Bereavement

Forging relationships marked by a sense of belonging.

Self-consciousness in younger adolescents would prevent discussions about grief because of fear of appearing different.

Silence (re: grief) may result in psychosomatic complaints.

Adolescent Sibling Bereavement

Developing a confident self-image as well as gaining a sense of mastery and control.

Adolescent self-concept was negatively related to intensity of bereavement over sibling death. In other words, low intensity of grief was associated with high self-concept and high intensity of grief was associated with low self-concept (Hogan & Greenfield, 1991).

Adolescent Sibling Bereavement

Developing a confident self-image as well as gaining a sense of mastery and control.

“Dysfunctional patterns of self-concept were associated with adolescents who continued to experience intense grief for 18 months or more since the death of a brother or sister”

Adolescents lacking self-confidence appear to find grief work a more enduring challenge than other adolescents coping with bereavement.

Hogan and DeSantis (1996, p179)

Unfortunately, the needs of the bereaved teenager have been sorely overlooked for decades. In many grief recovery programs, support is often available for younger children and adults, but there is a definite void in adolescent services.

The Grief

Is enduring - even though they may hide it.

There may be concern about being seen as different/odd by valued peers.
They may also hide their grief from adults in order to maintain a sense of separateness from them.

Losses are slowly resolved.

Their grief is both intermittent and continuous (ie., episodes of intense grief with an underlying sense of loss that seems almost to be “background noise”).
Grief extends over a long period of time.

Adolescent bereavement following the death of friends

Developing intimacy

Survivor guilt may be experienced following the death of a friend.

Bereavement over a friend's death can evolve into losses of other friends who are not grieving.

There may be an increase in risk taking behaviours.

Teenagers often give us mixed messages.

They tell us that they need and expect our help in providing them with food and a nurturing environment, but they also tell us that they can run their lives on their own.

Because people do not always know how to respond to teens, they frequently back off, resulting in an adolescent who may be left to grieve alone or with very limited support.

The Grief

Is unique to the adolescent.

They often believe they are experiencing grief that is unique and has never been experienced before, which may increase their risk due to feelings of isolation
“No one can ever understand what I'm feeling. I'm all alone in this.”

May be suppressed or limited to brief outbursts

As they often fear loss of emotional control and fear of looking odd, wary about how things appear to others.

Adolescents...

May have particularly intense displays of emotions (almost for dramatic effect) or may be stoic (don't want to let on).
Pseudo-maturity
May refuse support.
May feel a need to protect their parents.
Depression a common response among older adolescents
Active grieving may occur intermittently when circumstances are favourable
Disenfranchised — significance of relationship not acknowledged

Coping mechanisms

Given the freedom to use their own coping devices, many adolescents will do so instinctively.

We need to encourage adolescents to use their preferred resources and types of support.

The adolescent may become the scapegoat for the family, serve as the "safety valve" for the family.

Focus may be on the "out of control" adolescent rather than dealing with their own grief.

Coping mechanisms

Sexual acting out may be an attempt to be comforted.

The grief of adolescents may be disenfranchised, not recognised by others as legitimate or appropriate.

Therapeutic Interventions with Adolescents

The availability of support is likely to have an impact on the ultimate outcome of a significant loss

Adolescents suggest:

- Engaging in activities that reduce stress
- A personal belief system
- Parental support and a willingness to share memories of the deceased
- Friends' showing unconditional positive regard
- Support groups that help normalise the grief process

Helpful hints for Working with Bereaved Adolescents

Establish rapport first and use adolescent friendly communication

Allow expression and ownership of opinions

Give permission to show feelings openly and freely

Remember, as in the case of adults, feelings may be expressed at unexpected moments

Helpful hints for Working with Bereaved Adolescents

Keep open channels of communication within the family

Don't try to fix the young person's grief

Channel actions into constructive behaviours

Allow adolescents to manage their loss (via reflection, discussion, problem solving)

Ten Guidelines for Helping Grieving Children and Adolescents

Be honoured that you have the opportunity to help a grieving child or adolescent - don't be afraid.
Work within the limitations of the situation - you can't fix it.
Work within your own limitations - use your own skills and knowledge.
Before doing anything else, listen carefully to the grieving child or adolescent

Ten Guidelines for Helping Grieving Children and Adolescents

Listen a second time - look for nonverbal as well as verbal clues.
Be patient - allow things to come up time and again. Loss and grief are readdressed again and again as understanding changes and grows.
Share your own experiences if appropriate - but don't say "I know how you feel".
Be honest; trust is critical - don't pretend to have all the answers

Ten Guidelines for Helping Grieving Children and Adolescents

Assist the grieving child or adolescent in his/her efforts to cope with loss and grief:
try to understand their point of view
provide information
explore ways to find meaning
help normalise and validate experiences of grief
suggest ways to express strong emotions
explore ways of commemorating the life
help to draw out lessons about the preciousness of life.

Ten Guidelines for Helping Grieving Children and Adolescents

Be available and follow-up - other experiences such as a later loss experience, and normal life-span events may reactivate grief. This is normal.

(Corr & Corr 1998)

The 4 R's

Recognise

Respond

Ritual

Refer

The role of the principal in the management of emergencies

Personal struggles for the principal

The people around, particularly in a school setting, want to see assurance, calmness, to see that someone is in control. They look for it. I think that is probably the one thing I have learned. My own son was in that class and Matt and Phil had been on teams I had coached and was a student of mine. I remember that was tough to deal with. Because I got home at night and my son had been at school during the day and he had all kinds of questions. Being calm, giving him assurance as a parent. That was doubly demanding.

(Paul, Principal for 29 years)

The role of the principal in the management of emergencies

Personal adapting

The emotional impact of grief events are often downplayed or ignored by principals

So things are more out in the open now and I think that is good. The more you discuss these things and be open about them, because people do get emotional. The more you are positive, try to look forward and can discuss it with someone who is sympathetic, then that does help. It helps to talk

(Geoff, Principal for 15 years)

The role of the principal in the management of emergencies

Principals' management styles

That is also one of the things you have to balance every time, how much is the right response and how much is overdoing it? Oh, that is a HUGE consideration!

Be really directive. Delegate really effectively with directions. Don't be vague. In a crisis, it is time to be directive and clear and dot the I's

(Hazel, Principal for 10 years)

The role of the principal in the management of emergencies

Principals' management styles

Management by being prepared, discussing potential events before they actually happen. If A happens, what will the consequence be, just as we teach that to students in terms of their behaviour, know what you are doing!

(Peggy, Principal for 15 years)

The role of the principal in the management of emergencies

Leadership

In the management of traumatic events, principals' views of themselves as principals and visions that they hold for their school communities are operationalised.

Leadership requires a vision that frames, explains and justifies actions. A vision that recognises the 'personal' aspects in management of grief and a personal approach in care for staff.

The role of the principal in the management of emergencies

Leadership

The other aspect of leadership is that they understand that you are feeling this as well. I think that if they see you are handling this the same way you would handle a new library, that you haven't got any feelings about it, that is not good.

(Lily, Principal for 5 years)

The role of the principal in the management of emergencies

Reflections on the role of leadership

1. Standing up for what a school is trying to be as a school and demonstrating support to staff
2. Showing control to limit the hysteria
3. Actions that demonstrate support for staff, students and families
4. Being able to coordinate resources
5. Being a role model, demonstrating 'the words' and actions.

Five meta-analyses of bereavement interventions

Analysis	No. of studies	Effect size	Comments
Allumbaugh & Hoyt, 1999	35	0.43	Better for self identified
Kato & Mann, 1999	13	0.11	Most controls also improve
Fortner & Neimeyer, 2000	23	0.13	High risk gave better outcome
Schut et al., 2001	16 - all 7 - risk	Nil Modest	Pathological grief better outcome
Currier, Holland & Neimeyer, 2007	13	0.14	Most controls also improved

Currier, J. M., Holland, J. M., & Neimeyer, R. A. (2007). The effectiveness of bereavement interventions with children: A meta-analytic review of controlled outcome research. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 36(2), 253–259.

... results do not support the assumption that the bereavement interventions with children have a significant influence on adjustment.

Too much time passed from the child's loss to the beginning of intervention

Predominant treatment objectives (e.g. psychoeducation about loss, expression of grief-related feelings) did not address the needs of the vulnerable subset of children.

Lack of adequate screening

Outcome measures psychiatric symptoms or general behavioural disorder: and virtual absence of well-validated measure of child grief.

"High risk" children benefited most from the intervention

Effects of Intervention

(Schut, Stroebe, van der Bout & Terheggen, 2001)

Primary Preventive Interventions

- Aimed at all bereaved

Secondary Preventive Interventions

- Aimed at bereaved at risk

Tertiary Preventive Interventions

- Aimed at bereaved suffering from complicated or pathological grief.

Who Benefits from Bereavement Interventions?

"The general pattern emerging from this review is that the more complicated the grief process ... the better the chances of bereavement interventions leading to positive results."

Schut, Stroebe, Van den Bout, Terheggen, 2001

"most uncomplicated grief is probably naturally self-limiting ... one of the most important trends in these reviews is the recognition that there are subgroups of mourners who are at elevated risk for dysfunction and who respond well to formal interventions."

Jordan & Neimeyer, 2003

Worst case scenario scenario

(Schut, Stroebe, van der Bout & Terheggen, 2001)

Unsolicited, routine referral, shortly after bereavement for no other reason than that the person has suffered a bereavement.

Reauthoring life narratives: Grief therapy as meaning reconstruction

From a constructivist standpoint, grieving entails reconstructing a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss.

(Neimeyer)

What is meant by meaning?

...as an explanation for an event that renders it consistent with one's assumptions or understanding of the nature of the social world.

That is, an event "makes sense" or "has meaning" when it does not contradict fundamental beliefs about justice, order, and the distribution of outcomes.

One may make sense of an event by interpreting the event as consistent with existing views of the self or of the world or by changing self or worldviews to be consistent with the interpretation of the loss.

(see Janoff-Bulman, 1992)

The Assumptive World

The assumptions or beliefs that ground, secure, or orient people, that give a sense of reality, meaning or purpose to life. It is a conceptual system, developed over time, that provides us with expectations about the world and ourselves.

Typical components of an assumptive world:

The world is benevolent
The world is meaningful
The self is worthy

(Janoff-Bulman, 1992)

Different notions of meaning

Meaning is not clearly and consistently defined.

e.g ...one's ability to develop new goals and purpose or reconstruct a sense of self that incorporates the significance of the negative experience

Consideration of the positive implications or benefits that have accrued from their experience with trauma or loss

The explanation one comes up with for the event

Meaning as making sense of the loss

The loss had been predictable in some way

It was consistent with the caregiver's perspective on life, or

Religious or spiritual (afterlife) beliefs provided meaning

When people indicated that they could not make sense of the loss they often indicated that the death seemed unfair, unjust, or random.

If the loss is consistent with existing world views then making sense does not appear to represent a significant coping issue.

Processes of Meaning Making: Finding Benefits

Tend to fall into three categories: that the event...

Led to a growth in character,
A gain in perspective, and
A strengthening of relationships

Data suggests that sense making and benefit finding are two distinct processes and represent two distinguishable psychological issues for the bereaved person.

Some data suggests that it is not so much making sense of the loss that alleviates distress as it is becoming less interested in the issue. The finding of benefit on the other hand grew stronger with time.

Human Beings as Meaning-Makers

A. We construct order out of our experiences

I. We infuse our perceptions with hopes, anticipations, emotions, philosophies, and convictions. We are "hard wired" to impose order on even apparently random events, and to discern reliable patterns in the world around and within us. We are "condemned to meaning" (Sartre).

Human Beings as Meaning-Makers

A. We construct order out of our experiences

2. “What we think we know is anchored only in our assumptions, not in the bedrock of truth itself, and that world we seek to understand remains always on the horizons of our thoughts” (Kelly). This implies:

a respect for the multiplicity of meaning, the diversity of belief — no one has a “corner on the market” of truth.

the adoption of a posture of “not knowing” in relation to the worlds of meaning of others, and the cultivation of curiosity rather than expertise.

the reality-shaping role of meaning constructions, at levels ranging from the biological, through the psychological, to the social and cultural.

The storied nature of human life

B. Narrative forms and features

1. **setting:** the “where” of the story, its relevant context
2. **characterization:** the “who” of the story, and their intentionality
3. **plot:** the “what” of the story, its “event structure”
4. **theme:** the “why” of the story, its implied meanings
5. **fictional goal:** the “wherefore” of the story, its aim or objective

The storied nature of human life

A. Beliefs as “building blocks” or themes of a life story

We order our experience along a dimension of time, punctuating the unending flow of events in personally significant ways.

Cognitive science has demonstrated that we organize events using “story schemas”, imposing a plot structure on them with a beginning, middle & end.

Although bereavement may be a choiceless event, the grieving experience understood as an active coping process is permeated by choice.

— Thomas Attig

Creative Ideas

*One of the hardest things about grief is the feeling of helplessness
- doing something often helps*

writing personal story/experiences
journals
unsent letters
drawing and painting
memory boxes
making a personal pilgrimage
photo collection
poetry - writing and/or reading
reading other people's stories
ritual - personal/specific
music that is relevant/expressive

Play

For bereaved children, “playing out” their grief thoughts and feelings is a natural and self-healing process.

Play permits and encourages the child to express difficult, painful emotions in ways that can't be put into words,

Play is often the child's natural response to the death of someone loved.

Play allows for the use of fantasy.

Reauthoring life narratives: Grief therapy as meaning reconstruction

A. Find or create new meaning in the life of the survivor, as well as the death of the loved one

1. Relationships with intimate others provide repository of shared memory, and their loss undermines our self-narrative, and with it, our identity. Grieving therefore entails “relearning the self”, as well as “relearning the world” (Attig).

Reauthoring life narratives: Grief therapy as meaning reconstruction

B. Seek strands of continuity in the relationship to the deceased, as well as points of transition.

1. Maintaining the thematic integrity of the survivor’s self-narrative often implies cultivating a continuing bond with the lost loved one (Silverman, Klass), rather than “saying goodbye” or seeking “closure.”
2. Keeping the connection: Marwit & Datson’s study of the sense of presence.

Reauthoring life narratives: Grief therapy as meaning reconstruction

C. Attend to tacit and preverbal, as well as explicit and articulate meanings.

1. Cognitive accounts are often simplistic, assuming that meaning making is a logical, verbalizable process. The “deep structure” of any belief system requires recourse to metaphoric and imagistically rich speech that “stretches” the expressive power of language.

Metaphors and Meaning Making (Martin, *Constructions of Psychotherapeutic Change*)

Established that therapeutic events considered important by clients:

focus on enhancing awareness and changing self theories

are higher in depth of meaning, figurative language and clarity

are accurately recalled six months later by 73% of clients

involve the collaborative co-construction of metaphors by clients and therapists

Metaphors and Meaning Making

Speaking of our loss metaphorically can help us speak in a more personal way and draw on terms that are rich in resonance and meaning.

*How would you describe your grief, if you tried to picture it as some form of image or object?
What would it look like?*

Biographies

A traditional technique for honouring the lives of important people is the biography, a written record that provides an account of the significant events, persons, places, and projects that shaped the life of the bereaved person.

Reauthoring life narratives: Grief therapy as meaning reconstruction

E. Facilitate the construction of meaning as an interpersonal, as well as personal process.

I. Meaning-making is a highly interactive process: the significance of a loss can be affirmed or disconfirmed, congruent or discrepant, supported or contested within families and other reference groups.

Reauthoring life narratives: Grief therapy as meaning reconstruction

F. Anchor meaning making in cultural, as well as intimate, contexts.

I. Personal reconstruction draws upon frameworks of meaning that are too large to be confined to a single network of relationships, and too enduring to be accumulated in a single generation. Individuals routinely draw on conversations and rituals of their cultural traditions. By ritualizing in personally and communally significant ways, people symbolically mark their life passages and reintegrate themselves into a changed social world.

Ritualization

Rando (1984) illustrates many of the useful properties of ritual:

- allowing individuals to act
- offering legitimisation for physical and affective expression
- delineating grief (i.e., limiting grief to a certain space and time)
- giving a sense of control (i.e., doing something at an otherwise uncontrollable event)

Families Making Sense of Death

“Coincidancing”
What the death was not
That there is no sense to be made
Death was unfair or unjust
Philosophical meanings
The afterlife
Religious meanings
The nature of the death
Attitude of the deceased towards death
How the death changed the family
Lessons learned and truths realised

Nadeau, J.W. (1999).
Families making sense of death. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Ritualization

Ritual refers to special acts that offer sacred meaning to events.

“Rituals make mountains out of moments” (Grollman, 1997). Ritual provides a space for grievers. A container to hold grief (Golden, 1994)

Effective grief rituals may be private or public, spiritual or secular, but they have in common some form of symbolic action that helps us reaffirm our relationship to that which we have lost, and understand our new identity.

Ritualization

providing an ongoing sense of connection to the loss, allowing space to safely confront ambivalent or confused feelings or thoughts

generating social support, and

offering opportunities to find meaning in the loss by applying spiritual frameworks to that loss.

• Rituals of:

Continuity
Transition
Reconciliation
Affirmation

Four Principles in Planning Ritual

Rituals always arise from the story.

The elements used in a ritual should be both visible and symbolic.

Rituals should be planned and processed.

Rituals can be planned at any time.

Drawing and Painting

Symbolic drawing, painting or other forms of artistic expression can articulate the losses and the possibilities for the future.

They can provide a bridge into feelings and issues that are difficult to speak to in a more direct fashion.

Art

Children can express their thoughts and feelings related to an illness, circumstances of death, nature of the relationship with the person who died and present worries and fears in the context of art.

Art allows for the expression of explosive emotions, sadness and pain in an acceptable framework.

Reauthoring life narratives: Grief therapy as meaning reconstruction

G. Use narrative as a method, as well as a guiding concept, to facilitate the affirmation or re-authoring of the self in the wake of loss.

I. Learning the “lessons of loss” is often facilitated by narrative forms of self-exploration and self-expression. Frequently, these can help give voice to a story that is untold, or find a new coherence in a sense of continuity disrupted by profound loss. At other times, reflective writing can represent messages “from ourselves, to ourselves, about ourselves” (Leitner) about what we need now.

Drawing and Painting

Precautions

Approach with an attitude of acceptance and curiosity

The product is less important than the process

Avoid interpretation - respect the meaning accorded to them by their creator

Art

Drawing, Painting, Clay, Craft

Free drawing

Inviting the child to tell a story about the drawing or painting

Memory boxes

Making a photo frame

Collage

“Words”

Reading & Storytelling

Reading offers an opportunity to identify with others

Reading helps children realise they are not alone

Reading can help children express feelings.

Letters to the Lost

Write with intent to say “hello again,” rather than to send a final goodbye.

Speak deeply, from the heart, about what is important in the relationship.

Consider what the other has given you of enduring value.

Address the words that remain unspoken, questions that remain unasked

Respond in the voice of the other.

Journals

Indications

Especially when losses are traumatic they may be difficult to discuss or even disclose to another. Writing can have positive impact upon a sense of well-being and an increase in immune functioning.

Journals

Write about aspects discussed least adequately with others, perhaps aspects you could never imagine discussing with anyone

Talk about events and reactions to them

Abandon all concern with grammar, spelling and neatness.

Write for at least fifteen minutes per day, for at least four days.

Schedule a transitional activity after the writing, before resuming life as usual.

Internet/Computer

Information

Grieving communities

Instrumental griever

The Dougy Centre
www.dougy.org

National Centre for Childhood Grief
www.childhoodgrief.org.au

Winston's Wish
www.winstonswish.org.uk

On-line support

Benefits

- Interactive, anonymous and increased access
- Reducing the sense of loneliness and isolation
- Opportunity to participate in a specialised group by age, nature of loss or gender
- Enabling a sense of a shared experience - a grieving community

Weaknesses

- Breaches of anonymity
- At risk of privacy breaches or cyber stalking
- Perpetuation of hoaxes and misinformation
- Limited feedback

May not be appropriate for everyone

Internet-based Grief Therapy

Wagner, Knaevelsrud & Maercker, Death Studies

Randomly assigned 55 adults with CG to treatment or control

Two personalized 45-minute writing assignments per week over five weeks, prompting:

exposure to bereavement (e.g. event story of death)
cognitive reappraisal (e.g. letter to friend with similar loss)
integration and restoration (e.g. coping strategies and plans)

Memory Books

What I most regret about our relationship is...

What I never heard you say was...

What I wish you could hear is ...

You most disappointed me when...

My most troubling memory of you was when...

I know I am moving ahead when...

Memory Books

My first memory of you was...

My favourite times with you were...

What I love most about you is...

What others say about you is...

Your favourite activities were...

I keep your memory alive by...

Personal Pilgrimage

Sometimes in the wake of loss we feel a need to re-establish continuity with persons, places, or traditions that have grown distant and disconnected from our current lives.

While some can be joyful adventures of rediscovery others can involve disillusionment.

Photo Gallery

Can provide vivid ways of memorialising the lives of loved ones. A private function of fostering our symbolic connection and a public function of prompting shared memories.

A calendar

A videotape

Cinematherapy

Cinematherapy is a therapeutic intervention allowing clients to visually assess a film's characters interaction with others, their environment and personal issues, thereby developing a bridge from which positive therapeutic movement may be accomplished.

By referencing movie characters and familiar dramatic vignettes, a young client may reveal his/her own internal process while having the opportunity to keep a necessary emotional distance from stressful or frightening topics.

Reflective Reading

Vercoe, E. & Abramowski, K. (2004). *The grief book: Strategies for young people*. Fitzroy: Black Dog Books.



Music

Have teens create a musical self-portrait of songs to describe themselves/or a musical biography of the deceased.

Ask teens in individual or group work to bring in music that expresses their feelings or thoughts.

Offer music relevant to the adolescents work.

Encourage adolescents to compile songs which give them comfort.

Use complementary techniques such as drawing, journaling, photos, painting, movement and dance.

Music

A resource for exploring feelings

Facilitates grief work in a non-threatening environment

Evokes emotions

Stimulates memories and discussion

Helps in coping

Enhances ritualization

Enables children and teens to share the absent person with others

Assists in feeling the presence of the absent person

Working with Grieving People Touches us Personally

It may:

Heighten our awareness of our own losses

Contribute to our own apprehension of our own potential and feared losses

Arouse existential anxiety in our personal death awareness

Worden in Rando (1982)

When confronted by pain of loss in others, we may...

flee/escape from the pain ... unable to help

may use defences of denial, repression or numbing (which may be adaptive or not)

or may allow self to identify with the person and experience the pain but not be totally overwhelmed by it ... *compassion*

Raphael, p.404

Principles of self-care

Accept the fact that you cannot do this work alone and still do it well

Understand you cannot do this work without let up

Practice what you preach: wholeness

Model what you stand for: healing & growth

Befriend your helplessness

Practice letting go

We Need to Develop Action Plans

Personal strategies for managing stress

Team strategies for managing stress

Organisational strategies for managing stress

Personal strategies

stress arises when there is a disparity between our ideals and visions, and the realities of our work situation ... be realistic

maintain good physical health and fitness

relaxation training/techniques

“decompression” routine between work and home

personally rewarding activities for rest and relaxation

good personal emotional support (informal or formal)

develop a sense of humour

Caring for ourselves so we can help others

We should:

Be realistic/manage expectations

Develop our coping resources

Use support

Try to share the support role

Try to keep a ‘balance’ of giving and receiving

Develop conscious strategies to unwind and relieve stress

Team and organisational strategies

ongoing opportunities for education and training

opportunities for group support

informal practical and emotional support from peers

memorial services/occasions which validate staff grief

formal supervision allows us to share the burden of cases

back-up relief for cases which are hard to bear

officially sanctioned (or required) clear breaks

careful monitoring of workloads and working hours

Two Ways of Helping

1. I. Help ensure the effectiveness of the “healing community”

(not a primary support role)

- family support
- self-help groups
- grief support groups
- community rituals
- cultural elders/ritual leaders
- grief education

“...many problems arising from bereavement are due to the failure of other survivors to engage with the bereaved person in mourning together.”

George Hagman, 2001

2. Join the healing community in a psychotherapeutic alliance.

Share the continuing bond.
Experience the pain.
Be careful about imposing our own world view.
Walk a little ahead on the path to check out the obstacles.
Look for opportunities to help client integrate their grief into their family and community.

Conversation Responses

Questions

I want to know
what I want to know.

Advice

I want you to know
what I know.

Interpretation

I want you to know
what I know
about you.

Supporting

Reflect, Paraphrase, Clarify
I want to know
what you know.